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DE RUEHBW #0112 0291639  
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R 291639Z JAN 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BELGRADE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2119  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS BELGRADE 000112

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E.O. 12958: N/A  
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SUBJECT: SERBIA: POSITIVE RECEPTION FOR INTERIM AGREEMENT WITH EU

Summary

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11. (SBU) President Boris Tadic was able to spin the January 28 announcement of a political agreement between the EU and Serbia as a victory. He thereby avoided a self-inflicted wound, since he had promised an SAA signature without securing it in advance. End Summary.

Positive Media Coverage

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12. (U) Serbian media spun the January 28 announcement in Brussels of an EU welcome and offer of a political agreement as a good news story and, for now, let President Boris Tadic off the hook for not delivering more. Most major dailies reported on the front page that European Union countries had unanimously endorsed the plan for a February 7 signing of an agreement with Serbia that would create a framework for discussion of political issues, free trade, cooperation in education, and, perhaps most importantly, visa liberalization. "The EU wishes to foster its relations with Serbia based on the rich and varied framework of cultural, historical, economic and human relations, and consequently invites Serbia to step up political cooperation in order to accelerate its progress towards the EU, including the issue of candidate status," the agreement reads. Media reports that the agreement stipulates that the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) would remain the principal engine for progress in relations between the EU and Serbia and that the EU would sign the SAA with Belgrade "as soon as the necessary steps have been finalized." Media focused on the encouraging message of enhanced cooperation between Belgrade and Brussels. Only Radical Party presidential candidate Tomislav Nikolic highlighted Tadic's failure to deliver an SAA and ambiguously said that he (Nikolic) could do better. Prime Minister Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia reserved judgment until after the official presentation of the agreement.

Comment

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13. (SBU) The offer of this agreement and encouragement on the road to the European integration buttressed Tadic's campaign platform as the candidate to take Serbia into the European Union. Tadic dodged a bullet: he had unrealistically spun up expectations of a January signing of an SAA, something over which he had no control (without rounding up fugitive ICTY indictees). Foreign Minister Jeremic's active diplomacy in Brussels prevented a blow to his chances in this very tight campaign. End Comment.

MUNTER